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The rise and fall of Mr Choakumchild – learning outcomes and the teaching of creative writing

Tom Dobson

When I joined teacher training in higher education two and half years ago, one of the first concepts I came across was the “strategic learner” (Entwistle, 1983). In trying to understand the needs and the mindset of the student cohorts in front of me, this concept quickly became both appealing and explanatory: my students’ reluctance to engage with any task that did not have immediate bearing upon the final assessment meant that they were strategic; they were strategic because this is how their own educational experiences – A-levels, GCSEs, SATs – had taught them to be.

Though simplistic, this view fitted in nicely with my own experiences as a secondary school teacher and my response was fatalistic: to become didactic in my teaching style. Embracing the semantic connotations of the ‘lecturer’ as opposed to the teacher, I “transmitted” information (Corden, 2000) in a manner only dissimilar to Charles Dickens’ Mr Gradgrind insofar as he did not have PowerPoint to help him.

Dickens’ satire *Hard Times* (1854) opens in a lifeless classroom (“a plain, bare, monotonous vault”), with Gradgrind, a lifeless teacher (“square coat, square legs, square shoulders”), imparting lifeless knowledge (“fact, fact, fact”), to lifeless pupils (“empty vessels”). When their new teacher arrives – the aptly named Mr Choakumchild, an automaton straight from training college, a “factory” where “he and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been lately turned at the same time like so many pianoforte legs” – the empty vessels are filled with more of the same.

The labelling of learners has been the subject of recent educational critique (Coffield et al, 2004), the main objection being that that once learners start to view themselves in a certain way, all other avenues to learning disappear. No doubt reductionism in its many forms (inventorising, typecasting, stereotyping) is a human instinct – it is satisfying, reassuring, to think that you know other people – but as postcolonial studies clearly show (Bhabha, 1990; Said, 1993), this instinct is also about power and equally instinctive is the “other’s” resistance to such a dynamic.

My own students’ resistance came to the surface following a year one creative writing module. Throughout the module, the students had completed writing tasks which had been in response to two different pedagogical approaches: firstly, an unstructured approach made popular in the 1960s where an object or a photo is used to stimulate automatic writing without predetermined outcomes; secondly, a structured approach adopted by the National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 1998) where the analysis of published literature serves as a framework for writing to satisfy learning objectives. Discussing these approaches at the end of the module, I was surprised to learn that my supposedly strategic students preferred the ‘freedom’ of the unstructured activities which they felt allowed for much more ‘individual’, ‘creative’ input. My assessment of their writing underlined this fact.

This correlation between pedagogical approach in the creative arts and assessment was explored in some depth by Hargreaves et al (1996). Making a similar distinction between 'structured' and 'unstructured' approaches to teaching, the research found that teachers were much more likely to award higher marks to pieces of work that had been stimulated in an unstructured way, teacher feedback suggesting that they deemed these pieces more 'creative'. The researchers found that the main reason for this was that the teachers were far more thorough in their assessment of work produced in response to structured activities. This is hardly surprising: you are bound to mark more rigorously when you think you already know what the outcome should be. Conversely, you will no doubt be more interested when reading something beyond your expectations.

The realisation of my students' resistance was a critical moment for me and when I received Teaching Quality Enhancement funding to research the way creative writing is taught to undergraduates in other higher education institutions, I was particularly interested in exploring these lecturers' perceptions of the link between student creativity and pedagogical approach.

In an attempt to accurately represent the current practice of creative writing in higher education, I interviewed eight lecturers with a range of personal experiences: three writers who are permanently employed by institutions to teach creative writing; three academics who teach on creative writing courses; and two writers who occasionally teach creative writing at degree level. At the same time, the institutions employing the six permanent lecturers were purposively diverse: four institutions which are colleges or former polytechnics, having lower entrance requirements and making positive contributions to widening participation; and two universities with high entrance requirements which accept only students already engaged in writing.

In spite of these differences relating to personal experience and context, all lecturers and former lecturers were to some extent resistant to the idea of learning outcomes in the teaching of creative writing. The two participants who did find some use for learning outcomes worked in full-time education: one writer said that learning outcomes could be useful for the teacher in terms of planning; another that learning outcomes were a useful point of reference when it came to 'justifying' (N.B. not 'determining') an assignment mark.

Interestingly enough, the strongest antipathy towards learning outcomes was communicated by the two writers who only occasionally taught creative writing. One felt that "targets and objectives demotivated pupils", while the other directly linked learning outcomes to pedagogy claiming that "didacticism could be counterproductive". Similarly, an academic felt that learning outcomes led to the "artificial commodification of learning", and a writer claimed that "learning outcomes are at odds with creative writing where learning is gradual, subliminal, by osmosis."

In the introduction to his book *Teaching Creative Writing*, Graeme Harper (2006) reiterates Henri Bergson's distinction between "intellect" and "intelligence": the former a point of view to do with product, or fixing an already known commodity of knowledge; the latter being to do with process, knowledge as an organic and ever-changing movement. For Harper learning to write creatively is about "intelligence" and from this perspective it is easy to see how highly controlled, outcome-driven teaching could lead students to a fundamentally flawed belief that having successfully learnt all of the predetermined constituent parts, they would then be in a position to assemble the predetermined whole. Maybe this process has something to do with formulaic, genre writing – the kind of writing that Chokumchild would have produced had he chosen a different vocation – but it certainly has nothing to do with creativity. And as Victor Frankenstein himself found out, it takes more than the parts to make up the whole.

The way the relationship between reading and writing was described by lecturers illustrates this resistance to learning outcomes: one writer rejecting The National Literacy Strategy's one-to-one mapping, instead promoting a "relationship of proximity"; another viewing reading as "planting seeds for the future" and slowly influencing students' craft. More significantly, five

lecturers invoked Spinoza's concept of "intellectual love" (Rowland, 2006), referring to the "necessary pleasure" of reading and the "appreciation of craft" that was involved.

If it had been this "love" that was missing from my own students' reading of model texts, no doubt my pedagogical approach was largely to blame. I had not allowed my students to experience the pleasure of the text (Barthes, 1975), rather, in my determination to determine the outcome, I had been doing the reading for them: Mr Choakumchild forcing 'facts'. What pleasure could my students derive from becoming empty vessels?

Often talking of their classroom role in terms of 'facilitator' rather than 'instructor', a priority highlighted by all lecturers was the development of students as independent learners. Central to this development is the writing workshop, a form of peer assessment where fellow students comment on each other's work with the lecturer largely a by-stander (Bell & Magrs, 2004). In three instances, lecturers attested to this kind of peer assessment continuing beyond the workshop, holding the evolution of 'critical communities', often supported by VLEs, to be the most valuable contributor to student progress.

In his critique of contemporary education, Stephen Rowland (2006) goes back further than Dickens to show that the tensions in education were ever thus: on the one hand there is Isocrates, the behaviourist, for whom learning is about instruction and predetermined outcomes; on the other hand there is Socrates, the constructivist, for whom learning is about exploration and uncertainty.

For Rowland, all-pervasive market forces and resulting accountability (QAA, RAE, OFSTED, league tables) mean that we are at a moment in time where Isocrates is in the ascendance. Effectiveness is measured by managerial concepts such as learning outcomes and this means that instruction becomes the dominant mode. Lecturers and students both become strategic, complicit in a culture of compliance: to do otherwise would be either to risk one's job or one's assignment grade.

If Socrates is to rise again and our students are to realise their potential as creative, independent learners, then perhaps it is the lecturer of creative writing who can lead the way.

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